SEEKING GOD
LUKE 19:1-10
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The most important reality in my life is my love for my wife and her love for me. There's nothing unique about that: it's true for all of us: it has been true or it will be true. And yet, if someone should insist that we prove that we love our wives or husbands: or if suddenly we had to come up with some incontestable, tangible evidence that our spouse loves us, we would be hard pressed.

For the truth is that everything people do to express their love and commitment to each other can be explained away in a rather cynical, unromantic manner: as the expression of biological need, for instance, or as self protection. If you are inclined to, it is possible to describe marital love as the working out of human weakness and the desire for security. In the final analysis there is no way to prove that you love someone else: there is no proof that someone loves you. Rather, a love relationship depends on choice, risk, trust and faith. And if that isn't adequate - if we force marriage to become a daily proving ground for love: if we insist that the other keep documenting and demonstrating love, the relationship will suffer: the reality of love will remain illusive. For it cannot be proven.

The same is true of God. It is not possible to prove that he exists: or that he doesn't exist. In fact, it's really a little preposterous even to talk about it. In a fine little volume, The Christian Agnostic, Leslie Weatherhead writes: "There is something almost ludicrous in sitting down at a desk and writing the word 'God' at the top of a sheet of paper and then being presumptuous enough to add anything... Having just written the word 'God', I feel that the most appropriate thing to do would be to leave half a dozen blank sheets of paper." (P.71)

Weatherhead goes on to quote a Buddhist scholar who wrote, "The idea of God is quite acceptable to us, but we do not encourage the use of the word lest it should be tainted."

That's an appealing sentiment, and yet the Christian faith presumes to do just that: to say some very precise things about a God who has done and continues to do some very precise things. And although the Bible never addresses the issue, behind it all is the unproveable assumption that there is a God about whom we can talk in the first place.

So let us think this morning about the proposition - "There is a God", and let us see

where it takes us.

Some men who have thought about it hold that man has created God: that man needs a surrogate father and, therefore, long ago thought up a universal progenitor that could fill that need. Some have proposed that the whole idea of God was a response to man's primieval need to explain the mystery in the universe - or to have someone upon whom to blame evil and misfortune. From the scientific point of view some men have surveyed the vast catalog of information we now have about the natural world, the earth's beginnings and the process of biological evolution and concluded that there is not only no need for a God, there is no room.

The other side of that coin, of course, is the large and impressive list of intellectuals - scientists - philosophers - who have looked at the same evidence and come up with the opposite conclusion, namely, that the more we know about the world and the development of life, the more it becomes evident that there is a God behind it all. Among them would have to be listed Albert Einstein, Albert Schweitzer, Immanuel Kant, William James and Alfred North Whitehead. The concept of evolution for instance, is for some people, proof that there is no creator; while for others there is no more eloquent documentation of some supreme intentionality built into the scheme of things - some universal mind - than the orderly, ongoing process of evolution.

For me, at least - even though I know it cannot be called proof - creation remains a very persuasive argument for God. Now, let us not presume that he needs our arguments - but the creation seems to me to cry out in praise of its creator.

One expression of this argument is the watch maker theory. It goes like this. If a man discovered a watch on the shore of a deserted island, he would deduce - after examining it, studying, learning how it works and what it does, that somewhere there is a watch maker.

A similar expression is the theory of intentionality. In 1963, in a book entitled Law, Order, Cosmos, God, sixteen scientises testified to the basic orderliness in the universe and the incredible odds against that orderliness happening as a result of a cosmic accident. Professor Edwin Conklin, a biologist, said it best: "The probability of life originating from accident is comparable to the probability of the unabridged dict-

ionary resulting from an explosion in a printing shop". (P.87 Weatherhead)

I find that pretty persuasive. A doctor told me once that he never delivered a baby that he was not filled with humility and awe before the creator. I have experienced that. That one cell should become this - that one cell should become fingers and cornea and ear membrane: heart and blood and hair: that one cell should become this exquisite machine with a mind and a personality and the ability to love - that's quite an accident!

And yet there is no proof. Finally, it is a matter of experience. Even the scholars acknowledge that. The philosopher Whithead said, "Only at rare intervals does the deeper and vaster world come through into conscious thought....It is then, if ever, that the door to the invisible world swings open..." And Paul Tillich, "We experience moments in which we accept ourselves, because we feel that we have been accepted by that which is greater than we. If only more such moments were given us!"

It's the same reality expressed by the person who has had a tremendous spiritual upheaval in a revival meeting; who suddenly and dramatically knows that there is a God, that he is loved by God, that he is saved by God.

The reality of God is, in the final analysis a matter of experience. The trouble is, a lot of us haven't had one. There is a charming and good article in the November issue of A.D. by a lady who asks, "How Can I Know That I've Been Saved?" She tells a story that is very familiar to most of us. A friend talks to her about God and salvation and says: "You'll know without doubt when it happens... Your life will be changed: you will find a great inner peace, and God will be very real to you." "Then" the writer admitted - with candor that strikes close to home - "I guess it has not yet happened to me". (AD,P.28/29)

The temptation, of course, is to create those experiences: to coerce them psychologically. And I confess that whenever I sense it happening I am revolted and angered. I confess that I am most skeptical about a style of evangelism that promises to "turn you on with Jesus".

Well, If you are a somteime skeptic: if you worry about the fact that much of the time the word "God" doesn't have much content for you: if you want to believe and sometimes can't: if you are waiting for "it" to happen - whatever it is, welcome to the club - the first member of which was a funny little man named Zacheus a long time ago in the city

of Jericho.

Zacheus was the chief tax collector in Jericho, and rich, Luke tells us. As the chief of the tax collectors he would also have been hated. Rome depended on men who were opportunists to collect taxes. Their only responsibility was to turn over to the government an assigned amount of money. Whatever they collected over that amount they could keep. Thus Zackeus wes an important man, and as the one who presided over this entire questionable structure in Jericho, quite wealthy. He was also short. One gets the image of a bellicose, belligerent little fellow compensating for physical smallness by assuming an air of self importance. It was this man who wanted to see Jesus when he came to town, and wanted to see him badly enough to climb a tree.

It was not, I sense, a typical kind of thing for Zacheus to do. It was not the sort of thing that the citizens of Jericho were accustomed to seeing their pompous little financial czar do every day.

It's very tempting to speculate that Zackeus had a bad conscience: that he was quilty, lonely and afraid. Perhaps he was all of these. But the only thing we can be positive about is that he wanted to see Jesus badly enough to make somewhat of a specticle of himself in the process.

And in the process he was found. Jesus saw him, called him down from his perch, invited himself to dinner, and said, "Today, salvation has come to this house". Zacheus, I want to assume, was a questioner, a skeptic, a man who wanted to believe but couldn't: a seeker of God. Whatever he believed it wasn't satisfying enough: he had never known for sure the reality of God. He took a great risk: he went, literally, out on a limb - and in the process of seeking was found.

In terms of theology, you and I must do the same. We have to struggle it through. I don't think it's honest or responsible to believe that there is a God - or to believe certain things about that God without reflecting on it, doubting it, wrestling with it. I think we have to look at the evidence, and go with the evidence as far as it will take us. But then we must leap - not blindly, but from the point to which the evidence has brought us. Or, if we are Zacheus, one day we must climb a tree.

In terms of life, I believe we are called to follow first and believe second. That's what I see happening in the New Testament. Men laid down their fishing nets and followed.

they did not stop for a quick seminar on dogma. Men followed Jesus of Nazareth into an unknown future - and only later came to grips with the intellectual implications of what they had done.

Again, Leslie Weatherhead, has said it well: "I believe passionately that Christianity is a way of life, not a theological system with which one must be in intellectual agreement. I feel that Christ would admit into discipleship anyone who sincerely desired to follow him, and allow that disciple to make his creed out of his experience; to listen, to consider, to pray, to follow and ultimately to believe only those convictions about which the experience of fellowship made him sure". (Ibid. P.16)

I wish, somehow, that we could understand that and recapture it here. I wish we could see that Christian faith doesn't begin with the creeds - but with Christ: that personal faith is more a matter of following Christ than understanding the doctrine of the incarnation: that the church is a community of people who have climbed a tree in their search for God - rather than a congregation of souls who already know all there is to know.

I'd like to share with you a portion of a meditation written by a mother in the devotional guide, "Alive Now":

> It had long been my belief that God loved all of mankind, but I found it much more difficult to comprehend that he loved me personally. It finally became a reality through my own son when he was very small.
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> One night as I stood looking down on my sleeping child, my love for him seemed to reach out and fill the whole room; I experienced an overwhelming sense of joy. Instinctively my spirit rose in thanksgiving to God for the gift of our son and our joy in him.
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> At this moment there dawned upon my consciousness the certainty that God loved me like that - only much, much more. The assurance of his love ceased to be just an intellectual assent and became a living reality. It was then that I began to understand something of my own worth in the eyes of God, and through this recognition I found a new and growing capacity to love. "

I've been there - and I would guess you have been too. I haven't had a mystical,

Cataclysmic, saving experience, but I've been out on the limb a couples of times - enough times to know that it's out there that God comes to us: out there where we love deeply and give it all: and doubt and struggle and commit ourselves to something we don't quite understand.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a system of theology: not a series of statements about the existence or nature of God. Rather, it's Good News about a God who comes to us: A God who spoke through his prophet Jeremiah and said: "Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him?" A God who so filled the Psalmist that he could cry out, "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in hell, thou art there!"

An honest man will doubt. For an honest man there will be days and perhaps years when God does not seem very real. That is not unchristian. For the Good News is about an honest man who, himself, had moments of doubt: a good and honest man who climbed his tree - and as he died said: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." And for me, that's always been enough. AMEN

Father,we would believe: help our unbelief. Give us the courage of Zacheus to climb a tree: to extend self and stretch our minds: then, Father, find us: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN